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Pentagon Hedges on Planes' Tie to Latin Rebels

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 18 — The Pentagon acknowledged today that the Air Force had given three surplus planes to "another government agency," but declined to confirm that the planes had been passed on to insurgent forces in Nicaragua.

The Pentagon's chief spokesman, Michael I. Burch, asserted at a news briefing that the three aircraft, light Cessna O-2 observation planes, had been transferred in accord with property disposal laws. But he refused to identify the agency to which they had been transferred or the use to which

they had been put.

He also declined to speculate on whether the Reagan Administration had violated a limit on military aid to the Nicaraguan rebel forces set by Congress in September 1983.

Mr. Burch said, in effect, that the Pentagon's responsibility for the planes ended when they left Air Force hands.

The issue of the three light planes, believed to have been used to attack a Nicaraguan Government military school on Sept. 1, was raised late Monday by Senator Jim Sasser, Democrat of Tennessee and a leading critic of President Reagan's policies in Central America.

Mr. Sasser, having seen documents that detailed the transfer of the planes, said in a statement that the Reagan Administration could have circumvented a \$24 million limit on military aid to the Nicaraguan rebels, widely known as the contras, by giving away the planes.

"The key unresolved issue," Mr. Sasser said, "is whether or not the aircraft were transferred to the contras at no charge."

Mr. Burch said that he did not know the exact value of the planes given to the other government agency but noted, in response to a question, that two similar aircraft had been sold to El Salvador for \$47,000 each.

A spokesman for Senator Sasser said the Senator had written to the Secretary of Defense, Caspar W. Weinberger, and the Director of Central Intelligence, William J. Casey, to ask whether other weapons had been transferred secretly to the rebels.

In September last year, Congress said in a military spending measure that the United States would provide no more than \$24 million worth of military aid to the rebels during fiscal 1984, which began on Oct. 1, 1983.

Mr. Burch said that 20 of the low-wing, two-engine Cessnas had been declared surplus by the Air National Guard in 1983 and given back to the Air Force. One plane went to a museum, another to the Air Force Systems Command, two to El Salvador and three to the Air Force Logistics Command. The

rest remain in storage, Mr. Burch said.

The three planes given to the Air Force Logistics Command, Mr. Burch said, were turned over to the other government agency at no cost on Dec. 28 at Andrews Air Force Base, just outside of Washington. He refused, despite persistent questioning, to go beyond that account.

The Cessnas, first built in 1962, were modified for military use by Summit Aviation Inc. of Middletown, Del. The planes were used as passenger planes, forward air control spotters for bombers, and for aerial photography and intelligence gathering.

According to Congressional officials, the three planes in question were given to the Central Intelligence Agency, which flew them to Delaware to be fitted with rocket launchers. Then they were transferred to the anti-Government forces in Nicaragua.

In his statement, Mr. Sasser said: "Department of Defense directives prohibit the free transfer of surplus military equipment to foreign military forces. This situation leads me to believe that the Administration may have acted in a cavalier and irresponsible manner concerning the laws and regulations limiting aid to the contras."